DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 364 CS 216 522

AUTHOR Kurz, Meredith
TITLE All to the Center: Maintaining Equilibrium in the Collaborative Setting.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Cultural Pluralism; *Group Activities; Group Discussion; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; Learning Strategies; Multicultural Education; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

One of the issues a college writing instructor grapples with in teaching writing is how best to structure collaborative groups to maximize benefit for each student in a multicultural classroom where many students might fairly be considered "marginalized"--to create an environment in which they become "insiders." Criteria sets for forming group configurations include, for instance: designing discussion groups by mixing ethnicities, always including one strong English speaker; by mixing different personality types, with at least one strong leader; or by focusing on degrees of actual writing skill so that each group would have its own composition expert. A fluid model for re-sorting groups is done by mixing and remixing the groups using a file card for each student to identify gender, first language, learning style, writing strengths, and other information. (CR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Meredith Kurz

M. Kurz

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 460 364

All to the Center!

Maintaining Equilibrium in the Collaborative Setting

In their "Introduction" to A Community of Writers, Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow remind us that although "no one can teach you to write but yourself," humans do in fact acquire language socially, and that "the more we experience the pleasure that comes from communication--listening to others, reading to them, writing for them, talking to them--the better we get at all these skills" (4). According with their own philosophy, they present a groupwork-focused course model aimed at creating an environment in which students can best learn to write.

I embrace this model, but in applying it, one of the issues I grapple with is how best to structure collaborative groups to maximize benefit for each student in my multi-cultural classroom where many students might fairly be considered "marginalized." How do I create an environment in which marginalized students become "'insiders' (David Bartholomae's term) in the academy" (Lunsford 255). I generally had planned groups to provide each with one more highly skilled student and had depended on that stronger individual, for the duration of either the unit or the semester, to function as a surrogate or assistant instructor.

I had also experimented with many criteria sets for forming these group configurations, for instance, designing discussion groups by mixing ethnicities for equal first language representation in each group but always including one strong English speaker; by mixing different personality types so that

CS216522

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

there would be at least one strong leader in each collaborative family; or by focusing on degrees of actual writing skill so that each group would have its own composition "expert" on board.

With each configuration I sought to position one student to help others, but these formations sometimes produced complaints that "I am not learning anything in my group" from the more highly skilled students placed in leadership positions. In organizing these groups intended to centralize the marginalized, I seemed somehow to have marginalized the central by casting them in a fixed role as group leader.

To meet this challenge, I replaced my static grouping method with a fluid model, at the same time devising a simple way to re-sort groups with each new project, and, within each project, for each process; i.e., one grouping for discussion, another for writing, and another for editing. Here, students do not operate in a strengths/weaknesses equals insider/outsider static polarity because most students have chances to lead as well as chances to follow, chances to teach and chances to be taught.

To create the different types of groups, I simply keep a file card for each student noting gender, first language, learning style, writing strengths and weaknesses, and other information as it comes to light. Reshuffling the cards by category easily provides specialized groups for particular activities. For example, to form discussion groups early in the semester, I might organize for first language concordance so

that students can speak to each other easily even if they sometimes use their first language. After we know each other better, however, I will mix first languages but perhaps not gender so that, in another example, females from cultures where women do not speak publically still may feel secure yet will broaden their discourse arena beyond their own language group. Even later in the semester, when these female students are more comfortable expressing their views publically, I will include them in a mixed ethnicity, mixed gender group knowing that they have gained sufficient confidence to speak out.

Remixing works equally well for writing activities as some of our more inventive writers may lead the group for one writing activity while others whose strength might be in organization and coherence can take the helm at another time. Allowing more students to assume the teaching position provides another valuable way for them to learn, and frequent role shifting provides a stimulating dynamism.

The fluid model works well. As the semester progresses, groups operate more effectively and autonomously, students become more confident and skillful, but most important, no student is marginalized; the fluid grouping model eliminates the static group marginalization/centralization problem that a static grouping system creates. In other words, this more flexible group configuration method fixes no one group or individual either in center or on the margin.

Works Cited

Belanoff, Pat and Peter Elbow. A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing. New York: Random House, 1989.

Lunsford, Andrea A. "Politics and Practices in Basic Writing." A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987.